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## GEORGE MEREDITH'S INTEREST IN EDUCATION

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"He who's for us, for him are we!" These words from one of George Meredith's poems may well be applied to the proper attitude of teachers toward all who by public words dignify the profession of teaching. Yet it is probable that few teachers outside an English department realize his claim to our gratitude and attention. Fiction is not popularly associated with information and argument. To be sure, we have in *Nicholas Nickleby* a classic example of fiction dealing with education. But this illustration is usually forgotten when fiction is classified. Names of professional psychologists less acute than Meredith are doubtless familiar to a larger group of teachers than is his name. His critics have ascribed to him an ethical purpose, a habit of combining with relation revelation, and such purpose is evident to the casual reader, even. His *Letters* frankly confess the reformatory nature of his work, the most complete expression of which purpose is found in a letter to Professor George P. Baker of Harvard:

I think that all right use of life, and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us: as to my works, I know them faulty, think them of worth only when they point and aid to that end. Close knowledge of our fellows, discernment of the laws of existence, these lead to great civilization. I have supposed that the novel, exposing and illustrating the natural history of man, may help us to such sustaining roadside gifts.

The special subjects that Meredith intended to emphasize in his writings were admitted to be, in an interview with Mr. Foster Watson,<sup>1</sup> education and the emancipation of woman. There is a class of critics who, though acknowledging the importance of such subjects, object to the use of even such important subjects in fiction, which they claim to be primarily a form of art, a mere reproduction of life. Meredith himself discredited this narrow function of

<sup>1</sup> "Meredith and Education," *Nineteenth Century*, LXVII.

fiction, as is shown in the introductory chapter of *Diana of the Crossways*; here he describes imaginatively yet frankly the nature of "the novelist's Art, now neither blushless infant nor executive man," when it shall

have attained its majority. We can then be veraciously historical, honestly transcriptive. . . . Honourable will fiction then appear; honourable, a fount of life, an aid to life, quick with our blood . . . be wary of the disrelish of brainstuff. You must feed on something. . . . Brainstuff is not lean stuff; the brainstuff of fiction is internal history, and to suppose it dull is the profoundest of errors. . . . As much as legs are wanted for the dance, Philosophy is required to make our human nature creditable and acceptable. Fiction implores you to heave a bigger breast.

"Honourable" must fiction of Meredith's purpose be. Such fiction is useful not only to the English department. Meredith's writings merit the attention of all teachers. His most eminent critic, Mr. George Macaulay Trevelyan, the historian, says regarding the charge that "Meredith has exaggerated the importance of considering future generations"

he has only filled up a void left by too many others. . . . our duty to the future that we shall not see is associated in our minds with Mill rather than with Wordsworth, with Herbert Spencer rather than with Dante. This is not as it should be; and Mr. Meredith, in his capacity of poet and poetic novelist, has done what he could to apply a remedy. . . . Mr. Meredith thinks that the irresponsible rich do not take as large a part as they should take in the various activities that regard the coming generations—the rearing of families, social reform, artistic creation, the endowment of educational and other public institutions, and the ordinary economic production on which society rests.

All these things

Keep the young generations in hail,  
And bequeath to them no tumbled house.

Obscurity of style is probably associated with Meredith's name as intimately as are the titles of his books. This disadvantage must be one reason why his social ideas have not become better known. The two topics that I have mentioned as the themes about which he is most in earnest are combined in the novel named *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*. This belongs to a series of four novels produced within a decade and all dealing with the difficulties caused by unsuitable marriages. The educational plan, which is the secondary

theme, suffers from its connection with the main theme; it is difficult to believe whole-heartedly in the success of a school, the headmaster of which has eloped with another man's wife. In this case not only the style but the author's specific solution for the difficulty that he very clearly exposes is obscure. But the plan for the ideal school shows imagination and originality. I shall quote Meredith's own words describing this school, because these passages are not only intelligible but graphic.

The opening chapter of *Lord Ormont* contains a description of a snow-fight between two teams of a boys' school, witnessed by a girls' school, and includes this interesting comment:

Those girls had a leap and a fall of the heart, glad to hug themselves in dry clothes, and not so warm as the dripping boys were, nor so madly fond of their dress-circle seats to look on at a play they were not allowed even to desire to share. . . . The thought of the difference between themselves and the boys must have been something like the tight band—call it corset—over the chest, trying to lift and stretch for draughts of air.

This passage is indicative of Meredith's outcry against many conventions that hamper the female sex. The hero of this novel, Matthew Weyburn, gives his reasons for his choice of teaching as a profession as follows:

"Why did you not enter the service?"

"Want of an income, my lady."

"Bad look-out. Army or Navy for gentlemen, if they stick to the school of honour. The sedentary occupations corrupt men."

"Her mind was very clear up to the last hour upon all subjects interesting her son. She at one time regretted his not being a soldier, for the sake of his father's memory. Then she learned to think he could do more for the world as a schoolmaster. She said you can persuade."

"We had our talks. She would have the reason if she was to be won. I like no other kind of persuasion."

"I can hardly understand a young Frenchman's not entering the army," she said.

"The Napoleonic legend is weaker now," said he.

"The son of an officer!"

"Grandson!"

"It was his choice to be—he gave it up without reluctance?"

"Émile obeyed the command of his parents," Weyburn answered; and he

was obedient to the veiled direction of her remark, in speaking of himself: "I had a reason, too."

"One wonders!"

"It would have impoverished my mother's income to put aside a small allowance for me for years. She would not have hesitated. I then set my mind on the profession of schoolmaster."

"Émile Grenat was a brave boy. Has he no regrets?"

"Neither of us has a regret."

"He began ambitiously."

"It's the way at the beginning."

"It is not usually abjured."

"I am afraid we neither of us 'dignify our calling' by discontent with it!"

A dusky flush worth seeing came on her cheeks. "I respect enthusiasms," she said, and it was as good to him to hear as the begging pardon, though clearly she could not understand enthusiasm for the schoolmaster's career.

"I have the belief that I shall succeed, because I like boys, and they like me. . . . I have my boys already waiting for me to found the school . . . in Switzerland."

"When?" said Aminta.

"A relative from whom a reversion comes is near the end. It won't be later than September that I shall go. My Swiss friend has the school, and would take me at once before he retires."

"You make friends wherever you go," said Aminta.

"Why shouldn't everybody? I'm convinced it's because I show people I mean well, and I never nurse an injury, great or small. And besides they see I look forward. I do hope good for the world."

It is evident from the foregoing that Meredith felt obliged to justify, if not to apologize for, his hero's occupation. The following description of his personal appearance seems intended to surprise the reader as well as Lady Charlotte Eglett in the story:

Lady Charlotte's blunt "Oh"! when he entered her room and bowed upon the announcement of his name, was caused by an instantaneous perception and reflection that it would be prudent to keep her granddaughter Philippa, aged between seventeen and eighteen, out of his way. . . . She did not blame Arthur Abner for sending her a good-looking young man; she had only a general idea that tutors in a house, and even visiting tutors, should smell of dust and wear a snuff appearance.

We are told furthermore of Weyburn's appearance: "He could not help his being a handsome fellow, having a vivid face and eyes transparent, whether blue or green, to flame of the brain exciting them. . . ."

So attractive in person and mind is Weyburn that many readers must agree with Mr. Elmer James Bailey when he says (*The Novels of George Meredith: a Study*): "The reader, when he lays down the book, is somewhat shocked to realize that he has almost unconsciously been led into approval of what society regards as an immoral situation." But the marriage problem of the book does not prevent our belief that, without relation to social ties outside the school, Weyburn and his wife were noble and original teachers. We should be grateful to Meredith for making them dignified, cultured, and ardent. This book might encourage aspiring young men to follow Weyburn's example in the choice of a profession. He is socially superior to most teachers in real life, for Lady Charlotte had suggested that he was a gentleman, in the English sense, by recommending to him the army or navy as a profession.

I will add some sentences describing the mind and soul of Weyburn:

. . . . he was now a young man, stoutly and cognisantly on the climb, with a good aim overhead, and green youth's enthusiasms a step below his heels: one of the lovers of life, beautiful to behold, when we spy into them. . . . Weyburn knew that a spice of passion added to a bowl of reason makes a sophist's mess. . . . Nor had she, nor could she do more than lean on and catch example from his prompt spiritual valiancy. It shone out from him, and crisis fulfilled the promise.

"Spiritual valiancy!" Is there a more desirable quality for a schoolmaster?

Weyburn's plans for his Swiss school were noble in conception.

"The spot fixed on is in Switzerland."

"You will have scenery."

"I hold to that as an influence."

"If at my school we have all nationalities—French boys and German, Italian, Russian, Spaniard—without distinction of race and religion and station, and with English intermixing—English games, English sense of honour and conception of gentleman—we shall help to nationalize Europe."

He spoke to Weyburn of his prospects in the usually, perhaps necessarily, cheerless tone of men who recognize by contrast the one mouse's nibbling at a mountain of evil. "To harmonize the nationalities, my dear boy! teach Christians to look fraternally on Jews! David was a harper, but the sitting of him down to roll off a fugue on one of your cathedral organs would not impose

a heavier task than you are undertaking." . . . "You have beaten the Christians on the field they challenged you to enter for a try. They feel the pinch in their interests and their vanity. That will pass. I'm for the two sides, under the name of Justice; and I give the palm to whichever of the two first gets hold of the idea of Justice."

In the final chapter, an old pupil thus recommends the school:

"I was a sneak and a coward. It follows, I was a liar and a traitor. Who cured me of that vileness, that scandal? I will tell you: an Englishman and an Englishwoman—my schoolmaster and his wife. My schoolmaster—my friend! He is the comrade of his boys: English, French, Germans, Italians, a Spaniard, in my time. A South American I have sent him—two from Boston, Massachusetts, and clever! all emulous to excel, none boasting. . . . He works for Europe and America—all civilized people—to be one country. He is the comrade of his boys. Out of school hours it is Christian names all round. . . . But if the boys are naughty boys, it is not the privilege. Mr. Weyburn."

If I have influenced any of my readers to read *Lord Ormont and His Aminta* for the first time, I shall have accomplished something for the cause of education; but I warn any such reader that he will find the general level of the book, in spite of exquisite new passages, below the quotations I have given.

Meredith is "for us," but he can never be our champion to the extent that his ideas deserve, on account of the obscurity of his style; in the case of *Lord Ormont*, the imperfect social scheme lessens the consideration given to the educational scheme. This is hardly just.

We are in the habit of thinking adolescence a subject peculiarly interesting to teachers and defined originally by Clark University. Meredith's *Ordeal of Richard Feveril* (1859) contains a description of adolescence that, though not so accurate as our pedagogical data, gives an impression of personality that can hardly be put together out of the pedagogic list of attributes. Meredith's boys—a gallant band—all possess a distinct ego, a directing force, approaching spirituality. The diminutive hero is still heroic. Biography shows the spirit animating the energies—the canny young Franklin bent on self-improvement, the solitary Hawthorne; but in the analytic charts that we map of our pupils do we take into account this personality? I feel that children are all that the tables

state plus something more. Meredith grants to children, even, marked personalities; to him callow youth are yet centered. Young Richard Feveril shows most of the traits we have been taught to regard as characteristic of adolescence; but beyond this there is ardor of youth, the soul of the mechanism, that has a romantic charm. We acknowledge the religious and generally emotional character of adolescence; but I have yet to find a professional psychologist that speaks of adolescents with emotion. Meredith can help us to "heave a bigger breast." I will quote in illustration from an early chapter of *The Ordeal of Richard Feveril*, a novel devoted to the subject of a father's scheme for educating his son, and therefore one of the novels that are of interest to us.

The boy's mind was opening, and turned to his father affectionately reverent. At this period, when the young savage grows into higher influences, the faculty of worship is foremost in him. At this period Jesuits will stamp the future of their chargeling flocks; and all who bring up youth by a System, and watch it, know that it is the malleable moment. Boys possessing any mental or moral force to give them a tendency then predestinate their careers; or, if under supervision, take the impress that is given them: not often to cast it off, and seldom to cast it off altogether.

In Sir Austin's Note-book was written: "Between Simple Boyhood and Adolescence—The Blossoming Season—on the threshold of Puberty, there is one Unselfish Hour—say, Spiritual Seed-time."

He took care that good seed should be planted in Richard, and that the most fruitful seed for a youth, namely, Example, should be of a kind to germinate in him the love of every form of nobleness.

"I am only striving to make my son a Christian," he said, answering them who persisted in expostulating with the System. And to these instructions he gave an aim: "First be virtuous," he told his son, "and then serve your country with heart and soul." The youth was instructed to cherish an ambition for statesmanship, and he and his father read history and the speeches of British orators to some purpose; for one day Sir Austin found him leaning cross-legged, and with one hand to his chin, against a pedestal supporting the bust of Chatham, contemplating the hero of our Parliament, his eyes streaming with tears. . . . The Bread-and-water phase lasted a fortnight: the Vegetarian—a little better than a month; the religious, somewhat longer; the religious-propagandist—longer still, and hard to bear. . . .

Richard's pride also was cast aside. He affected to be, and really thought he was, humble. Whereupon Adrian [his cousin and tutor], as by accident, imparted to him the fact that men were animals, and he an animal with the rest of them.



"An animal!" cried Richard in scorn, and for weeks he was as troubled by this rudiment of self-knowledge as Tom [the farmer's son] by his letters. Sir Austin had him instructed in the wonders of anatomy, to restore his self-respect. . . . [he] retired into himself, where he was growing to be lord of kingdoms: where Beauty was his handmaid, and History his minister, and Time his ancient harper, and sweet Romance his bride; where he walked in a realm vaster and more gorgeous than the great Orient, peopled with the heroes that have been.

We recognize in these quotations the chief characteristics of adolescence known to pedagogy. But Meredith's presentation of them gives to the possessor a charm and a reality that our statistics cannot effect. When we read "contemplating the hero of our Parliament, his eyes streaming with tears," we think, "Noble, ingenuous boy!" Too much study of questionnaires produces an impersonal and unattractive impression of the subject studied. Meredith can teach us to study not detached attributes but personality.

A prominent character in *Richard Feveril* is Adrian Harley, the tutor. His work is not in proportion to the importance of his office. He may be dismissed with this description, that he was addicted to making jokes "delicately not decent, though so delicately so that it was not decent to perceive it."

To change comparisons for a moment, Meredith's treatment of boyhood gives it more dignity than does that of many writers of fiction. This may be seen in comparing Stevenson with Meredith. Stevenson, in describing characteristically the child's ordeal of going to bed alone, says:

Then let us rise and go like men,  
And face with an undaunted tread  
The long black passage up to bed.

This is making fun, good-naturedly and tenderly, of a child's fears. To Meredith a child's feelings are more dignified. Possibly he errs on the side of idealizing his little heroes, but at least he is not condescending.

He thus describes the emotions of little Harry Richmond, in the novel of that name, when discovered by his grandfather's grooms on a lonely heath at nightfall; as he wandered he had had wild thoughts of running away to sea, to enlist, to search for his lost father: "I rode home like a wounded man made to feel proud by victory, but

with no one to stop the bleeding of his wounds; and the more my pride rose, the more I suffered pain." In this fictitious autobiography Harry Richmond is of course speaking half humorously of this childhood experience, yet also with the idea of presenting to us the brave spirit of his boyhood. This attractive quality, a glowing spirit, is what I value most in Meredith's transcript of youth; I do not feel sure that he here is psychologically accurate but I believe that he points the way to what we need to recognize—intimations of spirituality in the child and youth. Our child-study seems here deficient. Personality, spirituality, ardor, these are possessed by Meredith's boy heroes. This makes good reading and is, I believe, valuably suggestive to us. We need to be emotionally affected by the young if we are to teach them well.

*The Adventures of Harry Richmond* contains among its minor characters the Herr Professor Dr. Julius von Karsteg, tutor to a German princess, a "man distinguished even in Germany for scholarship." His acceptance of the tutorship was an honor to the intelligence of the Princess. Through him Meredith voices his ideas on the danger of irresponsible wealth, for such an important social subject is not above the office of a Herr Doctor, in Meredith's opinion. There are other examples in his novels of scholarship acting as an authority on social questions.

*The Egoist* contains, according to the critics, Meredith's most masterly portrait of boyhood in the character of Crossjay Patterne. His teacher, Vernon Whitford, the hero of the book, having thus estimated Crossjay's qualities, planned how the boy might enter the navy: "'Crossjay has a bullet head, fit neither for the University nor the drawing-room,' said Vernon; 'equal to fighting and dying for you, and that's all.'" The boy does not seem to me entirely natural, but this much, at least, is as lifelike as it is likable:

. . . a rosy-cheeked, round-bodied rogue of a boy, who fell upon meats and puddings, and defeated them, with a captivating simplicity in his confession that he had never had enough to eat in his life. . . . He was not only indolent, he was opposed to the acquisition of knowledge through the medium of books, and would say, "But I don't want to!" in a tone to make a logician thoughtful. Nature was very strong in him. He had, on each return of the hour of instruction, to be plucked out of the earth, rank of the soil, like a root, for the exercise of his big round headpiece on those tyrannous puzzles. But

the habits of birds, and the place for their eggs, and the management of rabbits, and the tickling of fish, and poaching joys with combative boys of the district, and how to wheedle a cook for a luncheon for a whole day in the rain, he soon knew of his great nature.

I have mentioned a second instance of Meredith's hero being a teacher. Vernon Whitford is a more attractive hero than Matthew Weyburn, but the latter, who appears in a later book is, pedagogically sounder. Whitford's "sharply tutorial" manner suggests earlier ideals of discipline. But his relations with Crossjay, and the heroine's affection for the child, attract the reader's attention to the subject so interesting to Meredith, the care of the young.

In *Evan Harrington* the tutor John Raikes, a minor character, is a second instance of a disagreeable personality being assigned to this occupation. But while Adrian Harley was base, John Raikes is harmless and unimportant to the story. Here the tutor is used by Meredith to illustrate imposture, for Raikes "represented to you one who was rehearsing a part he wished to act before the world, and was not aware he took the world into his confidence." His position as tutor to an invalid young lady was secured for him by his old school friend, Evan Harrington, who knew Raikes's poverty; but when Raikes had presented himself at their old school and asked for a position as usher, the principal had said, "You an usher, a rearer of youth, Mr. Raikes? Oh, no! Oh, no!" That the principal was astute is soon evident to the reader. Raikes is almost a caricature, a Dickens-like creation.

Another minor character in this book, Aunt Bel, "a sprightly maid fifty years old, without a wrinkle to show for it—the Aunt Bel of fifty houses where there were young women and little boys," guesses correctly that one in the circle conjecturing the cause of her remaining unmarried, chose Latin as the reason. "A young man would not marry a woman with Latin, but would not guess it the impediment." This leads to a conversation illustrating Meredith's ideas on female education:

A divergence to other themes ensued, and then Miss Jenny Graine said "Isn't Juley learning Latin? I should like to join her while I'm here."

"And so should I," responded Rose. "My friend Evan is teaching her during the intervals of his arduous diplomatic labours. Will you take us into your class, Evan?"

"Don't be silly, girls," interposed Aunt Bel. "Do you want to graduate for my state with your eyes open?"

Regarding this young Evan the reader is put into a frame of mind to find the poor young fellow infinitely touching in his despair, though his trouble is only about the choice of a profession—he knows that it is right for him to continue his father's business of tailoring, but the work seems odious to the young man:

Evan had just been accusing the heavens of conspiracy to disgrace him. Those patient heavens had listened, as is their wont. They had viewed and had not been disordered by his mental frenzies. It is certainly hard that they do not mean to come down to us, and condescend to tell us what they mean, and be dumbfounded by the perspicuity of our arguments—the argument, for instance, that they have not fashioned us for the science of the shears, and do yet impel us to wield them.

He is not just at this moment a very heroic young man, but he touches the heart, this adolescent. A natural and engaging trait, soon no longer possible and perhaps happily so, is Evan's ignorance of the unfortunate plight of the young woman that he has saved from suicide; the waggoner intimates and at last is forced to indicate plainly that

the complaint the young woman laboured under was one common to the daughters of Eve. . . . "Why couldn't you tell that?" said the waggoner, as Evan, tingling at the ears, remained silent. "I know nothing of such things," he answered hastily, like one hurt. I have to repeat the statement, that he was a youth, and a modest one. He felt unaccountably, unreasonably, but horribly, ashamed. The thought of his actual position swamped the sickening disgust at tailordom. Worse, then, might happen to us in this extraordinary world!

The delicacy of this treatment of Evan's innocence is a mark of respect to him.

*Beauchamp's Career*, written directly after an election in which Meredith took great interest on account of the candidacy of an intimate friend, resembles *The Ordeal of Richard Feveril* in being the study of a youth's development. And this youth is one "born with so extreme and passionate a love for his country, that he thought all things else of mean importance in comparison." When he is less than fourteen he had this reason for preferring to be a parson rather than a naval officer: "In one particular, parsons are envi-

able—they have time to read history and decide which party was right in our civil war.” Here is a suggestion to us; history is a favorite study with boys; let us direct them, if they show no natural inclination, toward deciding “which party was right,” for a true opinion will be useful in all professions. Dr. Shrapnel, who talks like Carlyle, is Beauchamp’s teacher and friend; like the Herr Doctor in *Harry Richmond*, he makes notable remarks, suited to Meredith’s rating of this office. Dr. Shrapnel is a Radical and free-thinker. His ideas are Meredith’s personal opinions. Dr. Shrapnel’s relations with Nevil Beauchamp are represented as being more intimate than Beauchamp’s relations with his own kin. Crossjay Patterne in *The Egoist* admired Vernon Whitford, his teacher, more than any other person; pedagogists have noted the tendency of adolescents to admire chosen heroes outside their family; as Meredith presents the case, this relationship is not so much natural as desirable. Dr. Shrapnel’s grief during the crisis of Beauchamp’s illness is profoundly personal, almost parental. The mentor and master feels toward his disciple, molded by him, as toward a child.

Meredith believed in coeducation. His ideas on the education of girls appear in several different novels but are not worked out in such detail as are his ideas on the education of boys. His ideas about the education of girls are related in general to his belief that women must be recognized as possessing brains.

Harmony of the sexes, cosmopolitanism, individualism, sanity, these are in Meredith’s opinion some aims of education. I believe that anyone will be rewarded if for the first time, or with fresh courage, he undertakes to make a study of Meredith’s novels, for the purpose of becoming familiar with important social ideas.